Introduction to *Abelardo Morell* – Phaidon Press, 2005

Richard Woodward

The modernist revolution in style and politics that swept the globe between the 1880s and 1950s can be thought of as a set of rules, a list of commandeering dos and don'ts. Modernists disturbed norms across the artistic spectrum and, like all revolutionaries, focused themselves into a movement through written manifestos and unwritten dictates that spelled out new standards and practices for humankind.

When Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, and Mies van der Rohe unveiled their novel plans for life in the 20th century, doing away with Victorian pomp, bric-a-brac, and historical quotation in favor of abstract forms and structural transparency, they were also making visible pronouncements about how building should and should not be done in the future.

They were laying down the law. The choice was clear. You could follow the modernist program or be left behind. As Lenin said in drawing a line in the sand between the Bolsheviks and his old-guard enemies the Social Democrats, "He who is not with us is against us."

Arnold Schonberg and Anton von Webern were likewise adamant as they went about reforming classical music. Facing the disintegration of diatonic harmony into chromatic atonality—a breakdown he helped to instigate—Schonberg reordered what he saw as musical chaos into a system for composing in twelve tones. With its four combinatory rules for sequencing the scale (rules extended by Webern to include pitch and rhythm), the twelve-tone method became the dominant style—and in many academic quarters the only conceivable one--for composers in North America and Europe between World War II and the late 1960s.

Other modernists may not have been so openly absolutist but were just as keen to dispense with the inherited clutter of tradition. Contantin Brancusi pared away stone until all that was left were two polished sides and a continuous edge, while Piet Mondrian reduced painting to three primary colors separated by black bars and white voids. To adopt their ideas followers were obliged to renounce all other gods and to live on a severely restricted, low calorie, high protein artistic diet.

Alfred Stieglitz was another formidable law-giver who more than anyone else is responsible for photography's hard-won status as a modern art. Ridiculing the hazy focus and decorous gentility of Victorian pictorialism, he laid down the rules for "straight photography" – principles about correct subject matter and printing styles that still hold for many photographers today. He taught generations how to see. Paul Strand, Berenice Abbott, Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, Walker Evans, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and Helen Levitt—each with a distinct approach to viewing the world through a camera—are

nonetheless Stieglitz's heirs. In their work and remarks, they have enunciated clearly the qualities and practices that constitute a worthwhile photograph, and those that do not.

Post-modernism can be seen as a vigorous reaction against the idea that there are any hard and fast rules for making art or evaluating artistic integrity. Taking their cues from Marcel Duchamp, a rule-breaker who did his best to ignore the line between art and non-art, artists in the 1950s—Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Roy Lichtenstein, James Rosenquist, and Andy Warhol among others—favored styles that were impure in thought and deed, happily tainted by commercial or popular trends, the anti-thesis of the bravura, lonely, existentialist rhetoric of abstract expressionism.

In architecture Robert Venturi and Charles Moore ventured into the basement of history and rummaged through its dustbins. There they found broken pediments and oversized keystones to ornament their otherwise contemporary structures. In their writings and buildings they implied that following the rules of modernism as enunciated by Mies was for squares, that his many well-meaning disciples had needlessly locked themselves into airless boxes. Architects like Antoni Gaudi and Josep Puigi Cadafalch, early modernists who had been sidelined as decorative curiosities by the steel-and-glass urbanists, came back into fashion.

John Cage mocked the systematic approach developed by his teacher Schonberg by writing music according to the I Ching, a method designed to unclench a composer's grip over his sonic material and allow it instead to be shaped by the playful forces of chance--an idea of order more Asian than European.

Abelardo Morell came of age as a photographer just as the 50-year hold of modernist ideas about photography within American institutions was giving way to a more relaxed and ecumenical attitude. His work embodies this historical transition and reflects ambivalence toward the inherited strictures of his schooling but also a distance from the anythin goes flippancy of post-modernism.

In his desire to exploit the medium's elemental qualities, Morell has stayed within the fold of modernist photography. Perhaps no one has ever made pictures that so radiantly document the scientific nature of the photographic process itself as Morell has done in his so-called camera obscura series.

Similarly, many of his photographs of books are direct observations that touch upon some of the basic characteristics of light, ink, binding, and paper. He was among the first to present the book as a physical object, with odd, unique properties and associations. A purist in the sense that he prefers to arrive at the uncanny through the simplest means, Morell also honors modernist tradition in his choice of black-and-white. He does not draw on his prints or adorn them with blocks of text. Nothing distracts from the photograph itself as the primary thing that must stand on its own. His images seem to take sustenance from a culture animated by books and painting, before the electronic buzz of cinema and television.

And yet Morell's photographs demonstrate the myriad ways that our eyes and minds absorb pictures and narrative and words. The camera obscura pictures only seem pure. At the same time that they are made by exploiting the essential principles of photography, the pictures are highly constructed. He is not above rearranging the furniture of a room in hopes of creating what he thinks will be a more interesting result. They are set-ups.

Likewise, many of his book pictures are manipulated to make a point. He is not only eager to imagine how a thick dictionary could, when seen from below, loom large as a mountain; or to examine with a naïve wonder the solarized distortion that happens to an inked illustration on a shiny page when light strikes it from a certain angle. He is also keen to tinker with and improve on reality, most elaborately in his *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* series, but also in *Book of Durer Paintings* and *Two Books of Astronomy* and numerous others where the hand of the artist is visible, indeed pronounced. In a phrase that no modernist photographer likes to hear, Morell often uses his camera to illustrate his ideas.

The duality in his work may reflect the dangers of separating artists too strictly into rival historical camps. Modernism was never so essentialist and high-minded, nor post-modernism so teeming with mongrel forms, as the text books usually draw the two in timelines of styles. Or it may be that Morell's undoctrinaire approach to making photographs is the result of an easy personal style that remains open to suggestion. He believes in the importance of standards and self-imposed rules but is far from being a martinet as a teacher. The course of his early life having been disrupted by a violent utopian revolution, he seems noticeably shy about extreme rhetoric of any kind.

Whatever the case, Morell emerged at a time when many of the old categories were crumbling in American photography. In 1992, when the Museum of Modern Art in New York surveyed this new, more fractured landscape with a group show that attempted to take into account the spread of photographic-based art in schools and galleries during the 1980s, they called the show 'More than One Photography.' It was an understated declaration as well as an overdue acknowledgment that an era had ended at the museum and in photography around the world.

On the cover of the brochure for the show was Morell's image *Light Bulb* the first time he caught the attention of critics and curators. If it's unclear where Morell belongs in this new dispensation, or even what this new period of history should be called, there is no doubt he has been among the most protean and inventive photographers at work anywhere during the last 15 years. By himself practicing more than one photography, he has enriched the possibilities for his contemporaries, whatever their artistic faith.

***

Abelardo Morell was born in Havana, Cuba in 1948, and emigrated to the United States with his parents and sister after the Bay of Pigs but just before the Cuban Missile crisis in 1962. He was fourteen and found himself a refugee, unable to speak the language of his new country and forced to swim in American culture or drown. The process was lengthy

and difficult, involving seven months in Miami where he was taught English on flash cards. In New York City, where his father had a job as the superintendent of five apartment buildings, he attended public high school before winning a scholarship in 1967 to Bowdoin College, a small liberal arts institution in Maine.

It was at Bowdoin, where he eventually majored in Comparative Religion, that Morell took his first photography course. He had been a casual snap-shooter, posing his parents in the basement of a building where his father worked. But under the influence of contemporary jazz (he hosted a radio show that featured John Coltrane nearly every hour) and the books of John Cage (*Silence* and *A Year from Monday* were his campus bibles), Morell gravitated toward art with a wild, spiritual dimension. After developing his first roll of film, he sensed that photography could answer that need. With a camera he could express the alienation and turmoil—and not a little rage—that he was experiencing as a stranger in a strange land.

The photographic style that first attracted him—that of experimental surrealism—suited his mood and was adopted by legions of other young men and women during the psychedelic 1960s and 1970s. The visual equivalent of free jazz, it was a kind of photographic screaming. Morell would sandwich negatives, solarize his prints, sometimes stepping on them while the chemicals were still wet, push the contrasts until they resembled gothic woodblocks, do anything for effects that were weird and menacing. They were pictures, he has said, 'about things not making sense.'

The photographs from the 1960s and 1970s that Morell will allow to be seen in public, some of them printed here for the first time, are more subdued about displacement than his early college efforts. The "straight" aesthetic of Robert Frank, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and Diane Arbus is more apparent.

Two portraits from Miami in 1974 show him in an autobiographic mood, hoping to discover what he has called 'the Cuban me.' But a subdued surrealism—a mixture of Giorgio De Chirico, Alfred Hitchcock, and Minor White—can be seen in a picture of his soon-to-be wife with ears covered from 1978.

In 1979 Morell entered the graduate school in photography at Yale University, a program renowned during the 1970s as a bastion of street photography and for the lists of unwritten rules imparted to its students: print the full frame of the negative; don't illustrate ideas; shun romantic subjects; and if you must photograph in color, by all means please let it not be decorative. Morell readily absorbed these principles, photographing in earnest on city streets and other neutral environments. *Two Men Behind Glass* from 1979 seems to have been made in the long shadow of Garry Winogrand, Lee Friedlander, and Morell's chief mentor at Yale, Tod Papageorge.

However, by the time he had graduated in 1981 and began his own career as a teacher at the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston, however, a new generation of artists had picked up cameras and begun to receive unprecedented attention from the art world for violating many of the edicts taught at Yale. These artists, including William Wegman,

Cindy Sherman, David Levinthal, Laurie Simmons, and James Casebere staged their pictures, drawing from performance and video art, painting and sculpture, and saw nothing wrong with illustrating a concept, funny or disturbing, with photographs.

Morell was aware of these developments and, even if they produced more monetary envy than genuine admiration on his part, he could see that the style he had adopted at Yale was not the only avenue open to artists with ambition. He had begun ruefully to conclude that his own additions to the street photography canon would probably never be on the order of Frank, Winogrand, Arbus, Friedlander, or Papageorge. Instead, settling down to a career as a teacher, he and his wife Lisa McElaney, a documentary filmmaker, began a family in 1986.

Morell credits the birth of his son Brady with the burst of creative energy that propelled him inward, away from the street and into the home, where a more reflective and private world of perception could be found quietly in operation everywhere he looked. He remembers taking a picture of his wife cradling their baby and thinking as he looked through the viewfinder at their figures softened by the pebbled surface of a glass door: ‘They will hate this in New York and at Yale.’

A sentimental tribute to motherhood it may be, but the print has an elegance that his street photographs often lacked. What’s more, it led him to explore subject matter that he had previously ruled out of bounds. Although a photograph from 1982 of a house in Maine with a tent in the back yard shows Morell focusing on oddities of scale, it was the series of domestic interiors, beginning in 1987 and including *Milk Bottle*, *Doll House*, *Toy Blocks*, *Ball*, and *Brady Sitting*, that marks a clear attempt to present the world as if he were a child taking everything in for the first time.

It was not until 1991, however, that he made his first astonishing picture with the classic *Light Bulb*. He was trying only to illustrate the principles of photography for his students and, as the final image proves, the materials for his classroom experiment were miraculously primitive and improvised. One camera consisted of a Martini & Rossi cardboard box as a housing, the lens strapped to the box with some duct tape. The light source was no less funky: a bare 25 watt bulb. Then, with his 4X5 Toya – a far more expensive camera but one no more complicated in its workings – Morell documented what happens to light as it passes through a small aperture into a dark space.

Few others since the invention of the medium can claim to have produced a new kind of photograph, but with the *Light Bulb* – an image of an image being born inside a camera – Morell discovered how to illustrate what everyone knew to be true about the photographic process but none had before revealed.

The result is hard to decipher at first and only those who understand how photography works can easily see it as a transparent diagram of a camera’s visual mechanics. Morell is seemingly demystifying how a photographic image is created, upside down and reversed, when light is transmitted through an aperture on to a light-sensitive plate. But even those scientifically literate may still scratch their heads.

Light Bulb is similar to a magic act in which the sleight-of-hand artist helpfully replays a trick that has baffled us. This time, he says, he will take us behind the scenes and reveal the innermost secrets of his trade. He will even leave the end of the box open so as to reveal how his device works. As can plainly be seen, his hands are nowhere in sight.

And yet, the light bulb floats there, a taunting reminder that photography really is a kind of magic trick. Even though the science of light is being demonstrated in front of our eyes, we find it hard to accept what we're seeing. In the end, the process seems more mysterious than ever. Morell is being completely openhanded about what he is doing, and at the same time he is toying with us. It's a perfectly 'straight' picture but brazenly manipulative as well. In this floating light bulb trick the magician's smoke and mirrors and misdirecting cues aren't needed to fool us. Photography itself can do that.

The dozens of so-called camera obscura images that Morell has made since *Light Bulb* are a set of variations on this theme. He soon realized that applying the same principles but on a larger scale, he could turn any room into a camera. Allowing a tiny beam of light through a window so that the scene outside is projected, reversed and inverted, against the wall of the interior, he could photograph this process and make unpredictable images of the outside and inside as they merged. It took him several weeks of trial and error to figure out the optimum aperture and exposure time. But by the middle of the summer, 1991, he had developed a procedure.

Taping sheets of black plastic over the windows of a room to block out light, he leaves a 3/8 inch hole in one. This provides all of the light for the picture. He then sets up his large-format camera on a tripod inside the room, trains his lens on the wall opposite the windows, focuses and stops down the lens for maximum depth of field, opens the shutter, and leaves. Each exposure takes about eight hours.

He began with his own house in Brookline, setting up his camera in the living room, bedroom, and in his son's bedroom. Over the course of the exposure, the houses and trees across the street were streaked across the walls like apparitions. The soft edges of the projected scene added to the dreaminess of images floating upside down above pillows and rocking chairs. The camera obscura pictures allowed Morell to capture that sense of the bizarre he had sought after when he was experimenting with double exposures in college and had first come under the spell of photography.

The method is time-consuming but repeatable anywhere. All that Morell needs is a room with a view. Visible landmarks, either beyond the window or inside on the wall, contribute to the pleasure of these brainteasers. He has converted rooms opposite the Empire State Building and in the middle of Times Square in New York and traveled to foreign countries to make camera obscuras at the Uffizi, the Eiffel Tower, London Bridge, in his hometown of Havana, and at the birthplace of photography, William Fox Talbot's estate at Lacock Abbey.

Morell can never predict how the various ingredients will interact when photographed together and, needing bright sunlight, he is always at the mercy of a cloudy day. But he can get a reasonable idea of the final result by waiting in the dark room for many minutes until the light from outside begins to seep indoors. This previewing allows him to adjust items in hopes of increasing his close-up success.

By 1992 he was photographing any household object he could find, from pencils to eyeglasses, with an eye toward bringing out their inherent strangeness as physical things. The brown paper sack on his kitchen floor is a portal to another dimension, and the pot in the sink becomes an industrial smelter, water from the tap pouring over the lip like some toxic viscous liquid. Morell cleverly exploits some of the basic tendencies of black-and-white still photography. In the view from overhead or close-up that distorts size and distance, in the abstracting gray scale that can dress anything in a handsome lead-colored coat, he finds that he is able to alter ordinary perception with minimal intervention.

He soon became intrigued by the magical qualities of books. Perhaps no objects in our lives are so fetishized and yet so taken for granted. The parameters of the information that can go into a book are as boundless as the outlines of the container itself are restricted by historical norms. The design of a rectangle with sheaves of pages, built to fit into rows on shelves along walls in stores and libraries, has changed barely at all since the fourth century. From a photographic point of view, these little boxes with their limited variety of shapes and sizes would therefore seem to be unpromising material.

It is perhaps this preconception that Morell was happiest to explode for, when seen by his camera, books turn out to be polymorphously perverse. Inside and outside, close-up or from a normal reading distance, they are laced with erotic anxiety and fun-house playfulness. Illustrations in art history tomes yield especially peculiar results. *Boy with Fruit by Caravaggio* virtually disappears in a blast of light, leaving only a faint outline of embossed ink. The voluptuous body of *The Naked Maja by Goya* floats on the sensuous wave of the open page. But her seductive charms can't help her. No match for the confines of the book that holds her, she sinks into the gutter of the binding and, we can imagine, will soon disappear entirely between closed covers.

The rigidities of book technology, Morell's photographs argue, have shaped our view of the history of art as powerfully as the originals them-selves. Reproductions shrunk to accommodate the scale of a uniform page are anything but faithful. Studied by a camera, which doesn't correct for distortion as automatically as our minds do, the icons of the western tradition appear to be freaks, their bodies sliced in half or grossly distended. Landscapes ostensibly bucolic are fractured and illogical when compressed into bound pages. Morell has to be aware that his own photographs are subject to the same warped perspectives when sandwiched in a book, this one being no exception.

Like photographs, maps are a necessary distortion—a way to organize knowledge so that the world's physical vastnesses and irregularities can be abstractly shrunk and held in both hands. Morell has played with this idea by making a lake of real water within the folded depression of a map's colored-coded view of the southern U.S. and Caribbean and

by cracking other visual jokes about our futile efforts to draw accurate pictures of a country or a continent. In his cognitive riddles about representation Morell is like a puckish Ludwig Wittgenstein or, closer to home, like Vic Muniz, another émigré artist who has made good in the American art world, and perhaps the contemporary photographer with whom Morell has deepest affinities.

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland was a natural project for an artist who had already photographed a grocery sack on the kitchen floor as though it were a rabbit hole. By photocopying Alice and her crew of zanies as originally drawn by Sir John Tenniel for Lewis Carroll's fantasies, and by then arranging the figures in scenarios that emphasized their flatness within the fuller hazards of actual books, Morell was again happy to shuttle between representational and physical dimensions. The photographs act as a commentary on the odd—and very Carrollian—spectacle of the two spheres interacting. That the figures had been enlarged and cut out was perfectly in keeping with the slippery, and sometimes dangerous spirit of a fictional universe where scale is never fixed and there is always a threat that heads will be cut off.

Morell's close-ups of American currency offer further wry notes about a material world that we too often accept on face value and probably shouldn't. Handmade paper sculptures, they are as obviously constructed as his maps of water or his revisionist *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. More fabricated than discovered images, they nonetheless try to maintain the same fresh, open-eyed outlook on the ordinary that is apparent in *Light Bulb*. Many pictures are a kind of 'noodling', art made with stuff found in anyone's wallet. What bored American teenage boy hasn't at one time folded a dollar bill so that George Washington's head becomes a mushroom?

But like the painted flags, numbers, and alphabets of Jasper Johns, the photographed $10s and $20s of Morell are also puzzles—pictures about pictures, representations of representations. The U.S. dollar is for many people outside the fifty states an oppressive metaphor for American hegemony. The engraved visages of Andrew Jackson, Ulysses S. Grant, and Benjamin Harrison on pieces of paper are symbols of America's global reach and likely familiar now to more people in South America than posters of Che Guevara in a beret. These potent symbols, which routine has dulled us into regarding mainly as things that stand for other things—flags for nations, dollars for wealth—become, in the work of both artists, unusual objects in themselves rather than simply markers of something grander.

By basing an entire series on an iconography developed by the U.S. Treasury Department, Morell would seem to acknowledge the political reality of American power. In 2002, as he was beginning these pictures, he finally exchanged his Alien Registration Green Card for a US passport, an acknowledgement that the adopted country where he has lived for forty years, married with two children, was truly home. But the series is more a gentle spoof of finance, a wonderment that these prized rectangles of paper are seldom, if ever, carefully examined by those of us who pass them hand to hand every day.

Morell thinks big by keeping his focus small. His eye can't help being drawn to romantic decay, to the Laocoon-like contortions of bound pages damaged by flood or a box of shredded, worthless money. And yet he also sees how light on the gilded edges of a stack of library books suddenly transforms them into bars of gold. Alert to the vicissitudes of the physical that the camera lens is ideally suited to capture and magnify, but driven to

express the metaphysical and transcendent—to venture into the realms of dreams and death—Morell has a mocking, adventurous spirit that shows no sign of being jaded by the remarkable strangeness of being here on earth.

Published by Phaidon Press, 2005